Developments

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Problem Gambling: Creating a Safe Space

Oscar Wilde famously said, "I can resist anything except temptation." It's a statement that is both hilarious and ruefully descriptive of the human condition, and especially relevant to those of us who work in the addictions field. In a sense, all of addictions work amounts to a very sophisticated way of helping people to resist the temptation of behaviour that is momentarily satisfying but ultimately harmful. In early recovery from dependence, the easiest way to resist temptation is simply to remove it. If we can help people to create a safe space that reduces their opportunities to use substances or to gamble, we can help them to focus on creating positive habits, to give them something enjoyable to look forward to as they let go of something that once was their primary source of joy.

This issue of *Developments* focuses on two ways of creating that safe space for problem gamblers: voluntary self-exclusion and residential treatment. In the first, the gambler invites the purveyors of games of chance to participate in the gambler's recovery, to make their premises less accessible. In the second, gamblers remove themselves from the environment in which they learned their noxious habit, and are actively encouraged to develop new and healthy ways of thinking and behaving. This issue includes a report of the recent opening of an AADAC residential treatment program and a listing of the residential programs available at addictions agencies funded by AADAC.

A Fresh Look at Voluntary Self-Exclusion

By Roszan Holmen

"A big eye-opener," is how Wendy Fothergill now describes the Casino and Racing Entertainment Centre Voluntary Self-Exclusion Program (VSE). As co-ordinator of AADAC's problem gambling strategy, she sees the program as more than a harm-reduction tool for problem gamblers. She also sees it as a unique opportunity to provide education and counselling to problem gamblers.

She hasn't always been so optimistic, however.

"I remember when the program came out in 2000," says Fothergill. "I remember my reaction when I first read [the package of information], and it wasn't favourable."

VSE was developed jointly by AADAC and the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) as part of a larger responsible gambling strategy for problem gamblers in Alberta. According to a prevalence study conducted in 2002,[1] 85,000 Albertans (1.3 per cent of the

adult population) are problem gamblers. An additional 3.9 per cent fall into the category of having moderate risk for problem gambling.

Modelled after existing programs in other jurisdictions across Canada, VSE aims to help people abstain from gambling. By signing up for the program, gamblers can ban themselves from all casinos and racing entertainment centres throughout the province for a period of time of their choosing (ranging from six months to three years).

Fothergill was initially skeptical about the program because it relies on punitive, external controls rather than addressing the root of the problem. Instead of receiving treatment, gamblers breaching their contract face expulsion from the casino as well as a possible trespassing charge and a $240 fine. The findings of recent studies, however, encouraged her to take a fresh look at voluntary self-exclusion. "When I finally read the research I realized that more than one researcher was saying that this is something important, and that there is a missed opportunity here."

Pat Sheptycki, manager of the new AGLC Social Responsibility Division for gaming, was equally impressed by the statistics. Quoting a study by Ladouceur et al. (2000),[2] Sheptycki explains that "30 per cent of people who sign up are able to abstain for whatever period of time they choose." These findings also suggest that another third of participants reduce their gambling activities substantially, leaving only one third who continually breach their contract.

For a program still in its infancy, these are impressive numbers, but the potential is much greater, according to Fothergill.

Beyond simply restricting gambling activity, voluntary self-exclusion offers a unique opportunity to reach problem gamblers with information sessions and various counselling options. High-risk and problem gamblers are a notoriously hard-to-reach group. Because they see their problems as financial, they do not seek out counselling as willingly as people with alcohol or other drug addictions.

"People are not banging down [AADAC's] doors until they get to this extremely desperate place," says Fothergill. "We need to see more people, and we need to get more creative about how to do it."

Citing Blaszczynski et al. (2004),[3] Fothergill points to three stages at which assistance can make the greatest difference: "the point where they sign up, the point that they violate, and the point where they leave a voluntary self-exclusion program." The need for education at these points is critical, because studies have found that most people who choose to self-exclude will return to gambling after their ban has been lifted.[4] Counsellors often assume problem gamblers understand that gambling is a losing proposition. "They don't," Fothergill stresses. Basic principles such as odds, randomness and house edge need to be taught.

And, to her satisfaction, the gambling regulators (and their funding dollars) are open to exploring the viability of these ideas. Sheptycki agrees that it might be wiser "to spend the money on salaries for trained counsellors to be at the [gambling] sites," rather than on a monitoring system. Ideally, Sheptycki would like to see participants surveyed about their views of the program, and pilot-test having counsellors on-site.

"We've got so many more discussions to have," says Fothergill about the new partnership between AADAC and AGLC. Communication between the two parties "has helped us look at what the possibilities are, and figuring out what we can do about it."

And there is a lot of work to be done.

Enforcement is an ongoing issue, and Sheptycki admits the detection system needs to be reviewed. Currently, everyone who signs up for the program has their picture entered into a province-wide Gaming Information Network. It is then up to casino security staff to scan these photos in order to recognize members attempting to breach their contract. "[Security staff] are pretty good at catching the regulars to their establishment," says Sheptycki. "But anybody new would be difficult for them to catch."

Most importantly, VSE is not as widely known as it should be. Although 847 people signed up for the program in 2004, making a total of 2,675 active participants in Alberta, these numbers represent only 0.4 per cent of problem gamblers in the province.[5]

Awareness of the program is on the rise, however, as are the number of participants signing up every year. Anne Mohl is a problem gambling consultant for AADAC and trains casino staff about problem gambling awareness and intervention. She is confident that the staff are catching on to the program, and more importantly, are spreading the word to the patrons.

Mohl explains that while upper management are sometimes more skeptical about voluntary self-exclusion and the prospect of turning away a major source of income, "staff feel that it's the one tool they can hang on to, and that they can comfortably promote."

With such positive feedback coming from the front line, Mohl, Sheptycki and Fothergill all feel that VSE is a worthwhile initiative showing real promise.

For more information on VSE, go to the AGLC website.

Endnotes

[1] Smith, G., & Wynne, H. (2002). *Measuring gambling and problem gambling in Alberta using the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI): Final report*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Gaming Research Institute.

[2] Ladouceur, R., Jacques, C., Giroux, I., Ferland, F., & Leblond, J. (2000). Analysis of a casino's self-exclusion program. *Journal of Gambling Studies, 16*, 453-460.

[3] Blaszczynski, A., Ladouceur, R., & Nower, L. (2004). *Self Exclusion: A gateway to treatment*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Gaming Council.

[4] De Bruin, D. E., Leenders, F. R. J., Fris, M., Verbraeck, H. T., Braam, R. V., & van de Wijngaart, G. F. (2001). *Guests of Holland Casino: Effectiveness of the policy for the prevention of problem gambling* [Unpublished English synopsis]. Utrecht, the Netherlands: CVO Addiction Research Centre.

[5] Nowatzki, N. R., & Williams, R. J. (2002). Casino self-exclusion programmes: A review of the issues. *International Gambling Studies, 2*, 3-25.

AADAC Opens Residential Treatment Program for Problem Gamblers

The majority of Albertans, 18 years and older, gamble responsibly as a social activity and do not develop problems. However, about five per cent of adult Albertans experience moderate to severe problems as a result of their gambling.

To assist Albertans who develop serious gambling problems, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission has opened a residential treatment program for problem gamblers at the Northern Addictions Centre (NAC) in Grande Prairie.

On January 3, 2005, the NAC Gambling Treatment Program designated four beds for males and females experiencing problems as a result of their gambling. Clients live at the Northern Addictions Centre for two weeks while participating in programs based on cognitive-behavioural treatment. A strong emphasis on group counselling and motivational interviewing will help clients recognize the reasons for their addictive behaviour, draw on their personal strengths, and make positive changes in their lives.

"The new program helps to fill a need for problem gambling residential treatment services in northwestern Alberta," says Kathy Landry, manager of the AADAC Northern Addictions Centre. "We're here to help, regardless of the type of gambling activity people are engaged in."

The program focuses specifically on gambling behaviours. Clients requiring assistance with problems related to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are referred to other AADAC programs and services.

The Northern Addictions Centre provides a gambling stabilization component through the NAC's existing detoxification unit. Similar to a program offered at AADAC's Henwood Treatment Centre in Edmonton, the gambling stabilization service is for clients who require immediate assistance with severe physical and emotional problems resulting from their gambling activities.

The NAC Gambling Treatment Program also complements existing residential problem gambling services offered at the following AADAC funded agencies: Aventa Addiction Treatment for Women, in Calgary; Poundmaker's Lodge, in St. Albert; South Country Treatment Centre, in Lethbridge; and the Walter A. "Slim" Thorpe Recovery Centre in Lloydminster (see following article).

All clients enrolled in the NAC Gambling Treatment Program attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings in Grande Prairie. After completing the program, clients are expected to continue participating in self-help group meetings in their home community.

The NAC Gambling Treatment Program also offers a weekend family program. Family members and significant others attend group counselling sessions with clients to learn about the effects of problem gambling on families and become familiar with solution-focused aftercare techniques for supporting clients within the family unit following treatment.

The NAC Gambling Treatment Program charges a nominal room and board fee of $15 per day

for Alberta residents and a $125 per day fee for out-of-province clients.

For more information on the NAC Gambling Treatment Program, including referral and admission procedures, please contact Ellen Loewen, co-ordinator at 780-538-6353, or Paulette Woloshyn, administrative support at 780-538-6403.

Residential Problem Gambling Treatment Programs in AADAC Funded Agencies

In addition to AADAC's residential treatment centres, a number of AADAC Funded Agencies provide Albertans with residential treatment programs for problem gambling. These agencies have been key partners in developing and refining residential problem gambling treatment programs, and they all have something unique to offer their clients.

Aventa Addiction Treatment for Women (Calgary) has been providing residential problem gambling programs since 1997. Designed especially for women, Aventa's services include a pre-treatment stabilization phase, a four-week intensive program, a three-month personalized residential program, and a one-year long-term transitional program. Gambling addiction is integrated into the overall context of each program, with gambling-specific information provided to those clients who need it. Aventa is the only agency in western Canada offering such an extensive range of services exclusively for women. For more information on this agency, please call 403-245-9050.

Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centre (St. Albert) was Canada's first treatment centre to offer programs with an emphasis on Aboriginal culture and spirituality. The centre has been providing residential problem gambling treatment for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients since 1997. The centre's 14-day intensive treatment program can accommodate up to seven people. For more information on this agency, please call 780-458-1884.

South Country Treatment Centre (Lethbridge) began offering a gambling-specific residential program in November of 1996. South Country's three-week intensive program uses experiential learning, cognitive-behavioural therapy and gambling-specific group work to give clients the essential life skills and self-reliance they need to recover from a gambling addiction. The centre also offers a six-day relapse prevention program for problem gamblers who have completed any residential treatment program, and hosts a weekly drop-in support group facilitated by a counsellor. For more information on this agency, please call 403-329-6603.

Walter A. "Slim" Thorpe Recovery Centre (Lloydminster) began providing a residential gambling recovery program in February of 1994-the first program of its kind in Canada. Since then, nearly 1,000 people have been admitted into the program. The program consists of three week-long phases, including a component for family members and others who want to support their loved ones in recovery. The centre has also recently opened a 16-bed post-recovery house for men seeking a safe place to live while they recover from addictions. For more information on this agency, please call 780-875-8890.

All of these programs include individual and group counselling, information sessions, life skills training and an introduction to self-help groups like Gamblers Anonymous.

Although these agencies provide the most extensive residential treatment options, many other AADAC Funded Agencies offer problem gambling treatment services including outpatient counselling, residential treatment and gambling stabilization for individuals experiencing acute physical or emotional problems as a result of their gambling. Problem gambling services are offered in 49 Alberta communities. Assistance for problem gamblers is also provided across the province through the 24-hour, toll-free AADAC Help Line (1-866-332-2322).

To learn more about AADAC Funded Agencies and Funded Programs, please call AADAC Funded Services at 780-427-1953 or visit www.aadac.com.

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AADAC RESOURCES

A Gambling Problem: How to Tell?
Part of the Addictions Awareness series, this pamphlet offers information and practical suggestions for people who have questions about problem gambling. The pamphlet defines gambling and how it differs from problem gambling, outlines possible signs of a gambling problem, lists some risk factors for a gambling problem, and offers useful ideas to prevent gambling problems. The pamphlet also includes a brief questionnaire to help readers explore their own gambling experience.

Other titles in the Addictions Awareness Series include

- *A Drinking Problem: How Can I Tell?*
- *A Drug Problem: How Can I Tell?*
- *For Parents and Others Who Care*
- *No Place Like Home: What to Do When Someone in Your Family Has a Drinking Problem*
- *What a Woman Should Know: Alcohol and Other Drugs*
- *When Someone You Know Has a Drug Problem*

Single copies of these booklets are available free to Albertans from your local AADAC office. For those outside Alberta, or Albertans wishing multiple copies, the cost is $10 per package of 50 (plus GST, shipping and handling) or $5 for a complete set of all seven. Please order using our online resource catalogue, or for more information phone toll-free 1-800-280-9616 or e-mail rdm@aadac.gov.ab.ca.

ABCs of Problem Gambling
The ABCs are a series of one-page information sheets designed to answer the most commonly asked questions about a variety of topics related to drugs and addiction. The sheets can be photocopied for handouts, and include space for additional notes or customized content. The *ABCs of Problem Gambling* provides brief, clear information about how gambling can become a problem, as well as a list of signs that a person may have a gambling problem.

You can find these and many other gambling-related resources in AADAC's resource catalogue. Watch for new resources coming soon!

UPCOMING

Acclaimed Addictions Conference Returns

From June 1 to 3, 2005, more than 500 delegates from the fields of addictions, medicine, health and wellness, education, justice, occupational health, mental health, children and family services, human resources and employee assistance will come together in Edmonton at PAC, AADAC's Professional Addictions Conference. The first conference in 2000 had sellout attendance and received rave reviews. PAC returns with an expanded agenda and presentations from engaging guest speakers, including Dr. Ken Minkoff, Dr. Scott Miller, Dr. Lee Gillis, Dr. Paul Roman, and Anna White. At PAC 2005: Insight Into Addiction, presenters will share the latest research and best practices in substance abuse and addiction information, prevention and treatment. Conference streams will focus on alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and problem gambling and the impact of substance abuse and addiction on communities. The conference will also explore concurrent disorders and address substance abuse in the workplace. Flexible registration options will allow attendees to take in the entire conference, or register for select days. There will be plenty of opportunity for professionals to meet over breakfast and lunch events to discuss conference streams and session topics.

Early registration until April 15 is $375 for the full conference; after April 15 the cost will be $450. For more information on PAC 2005, including the full schedule, presentation summaries and an online registration form, go to the AADAC Corporate website.

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